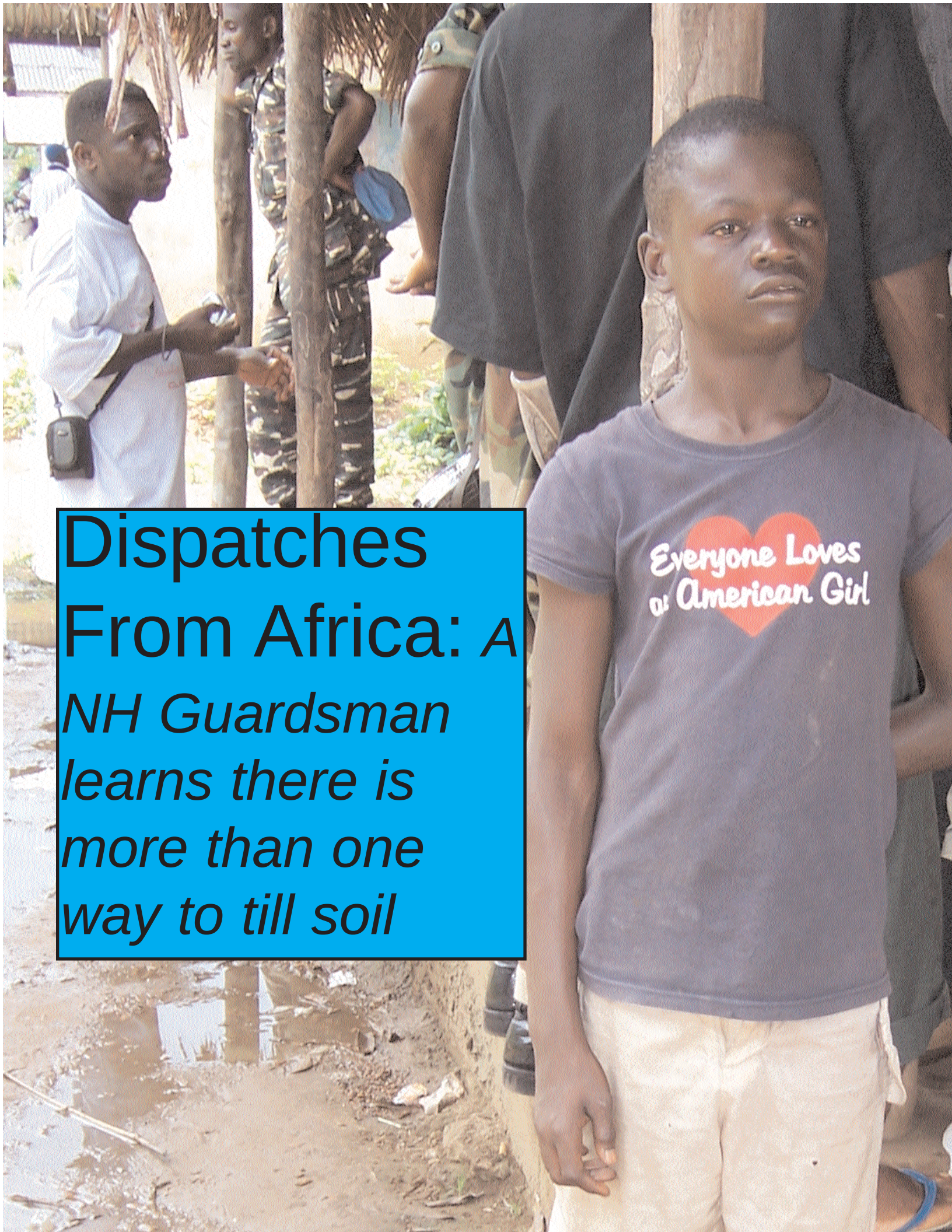

Dispatches From Africa: *A NH Guardsman learns there is more than one way to till soil*

Col. Peter Corey, former commander of the 2nd Battalion, 197th Field Artillery, NH Army National Guard, is on assignment in Liberia as the Civil Military Coordination Officer for a United Nations peacekeeping mission.

Liberia, which means "Land of the Free", was founded as an independent nation by free-born and formerly enslaved African Americans. The West African nation has suffered two civil wars, the Liberian Civil War (1989-1996), and the Second Liberian Civil War (1999-2003), which have displaced hundreds of thousands and destroyed its economy.

Corey coordinates all support between 15,000 UN peacekeeping forces, UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations and the Government of Liberia. His staff includes officers from Nigeria, Jordan, Sweden, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, US and a clerk from the Phillipines.

As the senior U.S. military officer in the mission, Corey is also responsible the health and welfare of 12 U.S. officers representing all branches of the military. He is on a nine-month tour.

He has been sending these dispatches to family and friends and has agreed to share them.

May 4: Visiting the Bangladesh sector

Today began a two-day trip to Gbarnga and the Headquarters for Sector 3. This is the only sector that has a pure military contingent from one country, in this case, Bangladesh. Two of my staff officers accompanied me; MAJ Thorbjorn Sikh from Sweden and Lieutenant Commander Monaiem Kudrotullah from Bangladesh. We call them Sikh (Seek) and Kudrot (Kudro) for short.

We departed our accommodations at 0700 (7 a.m.). Despite the early start it took us one hour to travel seven miles due to the congestion in the streets and markets around Monrovia. In some areas the people were so thick they literally swallowed the cars.

Once out of the city the countryside opened up and it became quite beautiful. Nearly two hours later we crossed from Sector 1 into Sector 3 and stopped at the first Bangladeshi unit location called Sallala Camp. This was a scheduled stop to "fresh up" as the Bangladeshis say. I was expecting an opportunity to use the restroom and maybe a cool drink and we'd be on our way. It turned out to be a one hour visit accompanied by a four course meal. It was delicious, very spicy, and similar to Pakistani food. Sikh was sweating so much from the spices that I thought any second he would spontaneously combust. He ate as much as he could and remained polite throughout.

The camp is very rudimentary. It houses an Infantry company that mans a checkpoint on the main highway and provides security for supply convoys. They have no AC, no cell phone service, no telephone, no Internet, and no running water. It was here that I encountered my first anti-rat device. A 12-inch high board is nailed across the bottom of each door opening so that you have to step over it to enter the building. Ironically, 30 minutes later we passed through a village and a little boy beside the road held up a huge dead rat. I'm sure it was destined to become someone's dinner.

Two hours later we arrived at the headquarters for Sector 3. I was greeted with more food as I waited to receive a briefing. I ate a little so as not to be rude. I was then escorted to a briefing room where the unit's Civil Military Coordination (CIMIC) officer briefed me on the unit's CIMIC activities. I was quite impressed.

They were providing vehicle maintenance, plumbing, electrical, first aid and tailor training. They distributed food to a number of schools and orphanages, they treated about 100 people a day at their field hospital, they built a number of wells, and they were building playground equipment and had renovated one school. They did all this with their own resources.

After the briefing I met with their commander, a one-star general. The man was very dynamic and you could immediately tell he was a great leader. He cared deeply about his mission and genuinely wanted to make a difference in the lives of the Liberians. After our meeting we all went to lunch in the officers' mess. Again we were served a big meal.

The Bangladeshis have servants like the Pakistanis. However, with the Pakistanis it seems like a master-servant relationship while with the Bangladeshis it's more like a host-guest relationship. They watch your every move and try to anticipate what you want or need. It's amazing and totally foreign to our military.

After lunch I traveled to the headquarters of one of the Bangladeshi battalions. Again I was greeted and offered more food as I received a briefing from the battalion commander. The food thing was really starting bother us. We were filled to the gills and it kept coming.

After the briefing we traveled into town to visit two orphanages and deliver some food. In a town of 4,000 these two orphanages had nearly 500 children. Many lost their parents during the war and others to disease. Some were just surrendered by their parents because they had no means to feed them. Both orphanages were being supported by the UN's World Food Program. The living conditions at both were extremely crowded.

We then went to a location where doctors from the Bangladeshi hospital were teaching a three-week first aid course to a group of locals. The course consisted of two weeks of classroom training and one week of practical exercise in the Bangladeshi field hospital. Finding qualified students in the local population was difficult. They established ninth grade education as one criterion for getting into the course. That eliminated the vast majority of the local population.

Guess what happened after the visit to the classroom? Yup, more food! We sat around in a break room for about an hour while servants again brought out trays and dishes of traditional fare. By now I was getting extremely uncomfortable.

While we were eating and chatting we somehow got on the subject of my rabies vaccination and the fact that I left the U.S. before getting the third and final shot in the series. They had the required vaccine on hand and offered to give it to me. I accepted and they had great fun watching as one of their doctors gave me the shot. They exclaimed that it was probably the first time in history that a Bangladeshi ever "shot" an American colonel.

After the excitement I was taken to my guest quarters. On the way my escort asked me what time I would like my dinner served. I thanked him but explained I was quite satisfied and it wouldn't be necessary to feed me again that day. He insisted that was not possible as everything was already planned. I finally gave in and agreed to eat dinner at 2100 (9 p.m.). It was only 1800 (6 p.m.) and I figured that after three hours I might be able to eat a little bit.

As we entered the Bangladeshi encampment I noticed a lot of soldiers jogging but all were wearing long pants. I couldn't imagine why as it was in the mid 80s with 80 percent humidity. My escort explained that their religion requires them to keep their legs covered. Yikes!

They delivered me to my quarters and said they would be back at dinner time. Amen. I did some writing for an hour and then stepped into the bathroom to shower. Just as I did there was a knock on the door. I opened it to find a servant with a tray of food and some water. I was dumbfounded. I thanked him and immediately began to wonder what I was going to do with the food. I thought of flushing it down the toilet but feared a catastrophe so decided to eat a little bit. It appeared to be pancakes of some sort but I soon discovered they were unlike any pancakes I'd ever had. They were filled with a thin layer of spice that was so hot it was painful. Fortunately, the servant returned in a few minutes with a sweet cup of hot tea and that saved my life.

Eventually I got my shower, rested a bit, and then went to dinner at the appointed time.

I ate little and returned to my room for some solitude and recovery from the six meals I'd eaten that day. I also needed some rest from trying to listen intently to my hosts all day. The Bangladeshis speak English rather well but it comes out fast like machine gun fire. I call it Banglish. I'm getting better at understanding it but it's a chore.

I'll write later with the adventures from the second day of my trip.

May 5: Feeding the prisoners

Today I continued my visit to the Bangladeshi sector. I arose early in the morning to exercise and was greeted by a frog in my bathroom. He didn't seem to mind my presence so I just let him be.

We had another great meal before starting the day. I had two new dishes that I really enjoyed. One was a curried potato dish and the other was a new kind of flatbread almost like a tortilla. I placed the potato in the flatbread and rolled it up like a fajita. That amused my hosts greatly. We finished up with a cup of tea. I liked the tea too. It was much more flavorful than anything I've had in the U.S. It had a chocolate overtone to it. I could easily give up coffee for something like this.

After breakfast we drove a short distance to the headquarters for the sector Military Observer (MILOB) teams. There are three teams in Sector 3 consisting of 49 officers representing 25 different countries. Each team has 12 or 13 officers and the rest are in the sector headquarters. MILOBs are not armed. They travel in teams of two vehicles and a minimum of three people. They are responsible for visiting different villages each day and collecting all sorts of information. The major information elements are public sentiment, criminal activity, status of ex-combatants, humanitarian assistance activities, sanction violations and border crossing activity.

I received a brief from the senior MILOB on the entire sector and then participated in the morning mission brief of Team 7, which is also located with the HQs element. I joined the only U.S. MILOB on the team and we headed out on a patrol. Our destination was the village of Foequelleh where there is a land dispute between the village school and a local man. This would be the second visit to Foequelleh to see how the dispute was being resolved.

Our first stop was the headquarters for the Liberian National Police (LNPs) in Gbarnga. The LNPs are a new force being trained by civilian police (CIVPOL) from dozens of other nations under contract and supervision of the UN. The LNP are grossly underpaid and poorly equipped. They typically have only one uniform, a badge, a flashlight, a night stick and a clipboard. They have no vehicle or means of communication. Amazingly, they have a good operating knowledge of the law.

The LNP headquarters in Gbarnga is a small two room building with no electricity, water, or sewer. One room is for the LNP the other is for the county supervisor. We needed to talk to the county supervisor about the land dispute as the county is involved in trying to resolve it. He had information that a surveyor was due to survey the disputed land in about three weeks time. We decided to take him with us to Foequelleh.

Before we left I chatted a bit with the LNP. Next to the police station is a highway checkpoint. In this case it's a rope draped across the road. The LNP stops every vehicle to check if the driver is licensed and if the vehicle is registered. He keeps a hand written list of every vehicle.

About 80 percent are not registered or the driver is not licensed. I asked him what he does if they are violating the law. He just writes it down and lets them pass. There is no way to enforce the law as the civil courts are virtually non-existent. Only persons committing serious crimes are detained. He had lists and lists from days and days of checking, all an exercise in futility. He was quite proud of it though.

Gbarnga is one of the few towns that has a jail. Unfortunately, the government has no money to buy food for the prisoners so here's what they do. Each morning, out of the goodness of their heart, the local Bangladeshi unit brings the prisoners breakfast. After breakfast the prisoners are released to go home where they get their own lunch and dinner. Each night they return to sleep in the jail. All this is unsupervised and has been going on for months. So far

none have run away.

We departed Gbarnga and headed north into a very remote area. The road quickly became a small trail almost like a logging road. It was very poor with huge craters and a few wooden log bridges. We passed numerous overgrown and neglected rubber and palm plantations. There were a few spots of activity where farming is being resumed.

One thing I find disturbing about Liberians is that they beg constantly. They all do it. It has become ingrained in their culture. They all want something for nothing. Whatever assistance they receive it is never enough and they beg and complain for more. As we drove along I was really bothered by the little children, some as young as two, who run to the side of the road and hold out their hand anytime a white UN vehicle comes by. It's sad and pathetic.

An hour of tough driving and we arrived in Foequelleh, a village of about 4,000. I included a photo of a vehicle leaving the village on the main road that we had just traveled. We used four-wheel drive yet somehow these little cars, as seen in the picture, make it through loaded to the gills with people and stuff. I think they take so many people so that they can get the car unstuck when they need to.

Once in Foequelleh we met with the district commissioner (photo attached) about the ongoing land dispute. He took us to the school where we had a long talk with the school principal. We then sought out the man who filed the dispute to hear his side of the story. Things rapidly got heated and eventually we had to step back and away from the situation. The problem is difficult because all deeds and property records were lost or destroyed during the civil war. And, because there are no civil courts, disputes such as this are decided by the village elders and in this case the village elders are split. Some side with the man and some side with the school.

We finally got all to agree to wait for the arrival of the county surveyor and see if a compromise could be worked out then. It was clear that this situation was dividing the town and could easily become violent. For that reason two LNPs had been stationed here when the dispute first came to light. But, both disappeared within a week and no one had any idea where they went. This is not an uncommon occurrence.

We left Foequelleh and after another ridiculously large lunch with the Bangladeshis we headed back to Monrovia. I arrived in Monrovia at 1845 (6:45 p.m.), much later than hoped, as I was scheduled to attend a function being held by the Swedish contingent. I find that because of my rank and position I get invited to a lot of events. The Chief of Staff's (remember he is a one-star general from Sweden) protection force was scheduled to pick me up at 1900 so I had no time to rest and only 15 minutes to shower and change.

The event was quite lively and enjoyable. There were a lot of influential people from various UN agencies and the US Embassy in attendance. I was expecting something typically Swedish but we had an African band and the food, which was wonderful, was prepared by a local Lebanese caterer. I had a great time and wasn't able to pay for a single drink, but paid for it the next morning.

May 11: More than one way to till soil

Today I had the pleasure of attending the "Launching Ceremony" for a demonstration farm. The project is being sponsored by NIBATT 9 (Nigerian Battalion 9) in Elwa Town a short distance from Monrovia. The project is meant to teach the locals how to farm multiple crops on the same plot of land. It's hoped that this will help some to become self sufficient by producing their own food as well as enough to sell or barter.

First let me describe a little about Liberia's agriculture. With the exception of the rubber plantations there are no areas being commercially farmed despite the fact that Liberia is one of the most fertile countries on the planet. A study determined that just 30,000 acres of rice production would be enough to feed the population of 3.8 million. This is one of the few places in the world where you can grow four rice crops in one year. Add to this sugar cane, bananas, pineapple, cocoa, etc… and you can see the potential. Unfortunately, few in the country desire to farm. Everyone wants to mine for gold or diamonds or live in Monrovia. There needs to be a big shift in their thinking in order for farming to become

viable.

Although NIBATT 9 is an infantry battalion, like any other military unit its members come from all walks of life. Some were previously farmers. The battalion secured a two-acre plot of land from the community for the purpose of the demonstration. The Nigerians will assist with all aspects of the farming for one year.

The Launching Ceremony was quite an elaborate affair. It was attended by the Nigerian Ambassador to Liberia, the UN Force Commander, and other VIPs including yours truly. (It's good to be a colonel.) The VIPs and guests were seated under some UN tents (no sides) facing the plot of land that had already been tilled and planted. The arrival of the ambassador and force commander was marked with great pomp and circumstance accompanied by the Nigerian Army band.

We had an opening prayer given by the Nigerian's Christian chaplain. This was followed by the presentation of cola nuts to the honored guests. This is a tradition in West Africa. Cola nuts are offered to guests anytime there is a celebration or special occasion. The nuts are first blessed by the eldest person present and then offered by the host to all the guests. Cola nuts are about the size of a quarter and perhaps a half inch thick. They're red or tan in color. You eat them raw in little bites or nibbles. They have the consistency of and taste exactly like a raw potato except that soon after you start chewing them they become very bitter. I managed to get through half of mine and then snuck it into my pocket.

We then had three cultural dance displays, two Nigerian and one Liberian. All were very interesting. Some of the Liberian dancers had bodies painted with different colors of mud. One of the Nigerian dances included a scary costumed figure with a mask. At one point the masked dancer rushed a group of uniformed school children that were gathered for the event and they scattered to the four winds screaming.

While the dances were going on we were brought drinks and plates of traditional local food. This included fried balls of dough, sort of like hushpuppies, small spicy shish kebobs, and spicy chicken.

The dancers were followed by a farming demonstration. This was another good lesson in cultural diversity. Three men proceeded to the edge of the planting with hoes. However, these hoes are not shaped anything like those we use in the US. The VIPs were invited to step forward to observe the demonstration. I'm thinking, "This is silly. Who hasn't seen someone till soil and plant seeds?" I joined the others as we gathered around the demonstrators. I was completely amazed at how quickly they tilled a sizeable piece of land with their African hoes and equally amused at how easily and quickly they planted the seeds by using their heels. I walked away thinking, "The garden tools we use in the US are ridiculously inappropriate and I'm going to till and plant my garden this way when I get home." I was also upset with myself because I had applied my western way of thinking before the demonstration even started. Every day here teaches me new and valuable lessons.

After the demonstration we returned to our seats and listened to remarks from the ambassador, sector commander, and the host community leader. We closed with a prayer by the Nigerian battalion's Imam. The prayer was delivered first in Arabic and then in English. That was very interesting and different. As a note, most West African countries have populations of both Christians and Muslims. They seem to get along fine although sometimes it does become a source of tension.

Sadly, I forgot to bring my camera with me today. I asked for some pictures from the Nigerian battalion and with any luck I'll send them along at a later time.

May 18: Greenville by air

My travels today took me to the coastal town of Greenville. Greenville is east of Monrovia and approximately half way between the capitol city and the border with Ivory Coast. It was once an important port. Although it is only 150 km from here it is nearly impossible to reach by road. There is a circuitous overland route which requires one to travel over torturous roads directly north of Greenville to the city of Zwedru and then southwest to Monrovia. Such a journey would likely take about 20 hours in the best of conditions. Today we traveled by helicopter.

Greenville lies in Sector 4, which is controlled by the Ethiopian contingent. Greenville is home to a battalion of Ethiopians, a platoon of Chinese engineers, a Ukrainian aviation detachment, and Military Observer (MILOB) Team 13. One of my U.S. observers is posted there. The purpose of my trip was to visit my US observer, accompany him on patrol, and get a sense of the main issues in his district. I was accompanied by two of my staff, Lt. Lee Sackey of the U.S. Navy, and Maj. Legese Mesfin of the Ethiopian Army. Mesfin serves as the liaison officer between my office and Sector 4.

Our day began early at Spriggs Pane airfield in Monrovia. This small single strip airport on the outskirts of the city is home to the UN's rotary wing aircraft. All the helicopters, to include the crews and support staff, are from Ukraine. I don't know the total numbers but there are two types of cargo (utility) helicopters and one type of attack helicopters in use here. Today we were flying on the MI-8, the smaller of the two types of utility helicopters.

It's very strange for me to be flying on these aircraft. As a young second lieutenant stationed in Germany in 1984 I remember having to memorize the silhouettes of all the aircraft being used by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact nations. All the helicopters in use here were part of that training. I could not have imagined then that the Cold War would end and one day I would be ferried around in a MI-8 by friendly Ukrainian pilots.

Before flying we were checked in and asked to wait in a small room without air conditioning. This became most uncomfortable as we were the few military being transported that day. The other passengers were mostly Liberians, both UN workers and Liberian National Police. As I mentioned in one of my earlier accounts the Liberians don't have access to running water like we do and thus they don't bathe often and aren't able to wash their clothes frequently. Needless to say the air in the room became quite malodorous.

I also noticed that the man sitting next to me had an open sore on his ankle that was weeping. They don't have access to medical care either. My mind starting wondering about how many germs were swirling in the room so I, and my two companions, took to waiting in the hall.

Eventually we were called for our flight. Eighteen of us piled into the belly of the MI-8 for the one hour and ten minute flight. We found the conditions of the waiting room to be repeated. Fortunately there were several windows open and once we were airborne the wind kept the cabin comfortable.

I found the inside of the helicopter to be much more rudimentary and uncomfortable than any U.S. helicopter I'd flown in. It looked rather run down and unprofessional. English words had been stenciled beneath all the Russian writing on the cabin walls and equipment, things like "emergency exit", "no smoking", and the misspelled "electrical gunction box."

Our flight path took us overland just inside and parallel to the coast. From the air the country is more beautiful than I'd imagined; endless expanses of lush jungle vegetation, unspoiled ocean beaches, and meandering waterways. It appeared idyllic. This was not my impression on any of my earlier trips where our visibility was limited to within a short distance of the roads we were traveling on.

As we neared Greenville the jungle seemed to become denser. Many of the large trees were bursting with color. Their entire crowns glowed in colors of orange, cream, or pink. This part of the country is already experiencing the rainy season and I suspect the trees were responding to the increased moisture.

We landed under cloudy skies threatening rain and were picked up by the U.S. officer. We proceeded to he Team's headquarters where we received a briefing on the entire district and the areas of greatest concern. There are three of them, Sinoe Rubber Plantation, Sapo National Park, and BOPC, which is a large palm oil plantation. In each there is illegal activity taking place. Two ex-generals have set up mafia-like organizations in the rubber plantation and are extorting "taxes" from the rubber tappers and residents, poachers are hunting in Liberia's only national park, and squatters are living throughout the palm oil planta-

tion and are making and selling oil that isn't theirs. Our patrol would take us into a village that lies within the oil plantation.

We drove north out of Greenville looking for a road to the west that the maps showed would lead us to our destination. On our route we passed numerous drop-off and pick-up points for raw rubber. The tappers drop their rubber here and periodically a truck comes by and picks it up. Oddly they're in the middle of nowhere with no one around. The rubber just sits there in burlap sacks. Why it doesn't get stolen is beyond me.

We stopped at one site where about three tons of rubber was waiting for pick-up. The raw rubber is simply the dried latex that has dripped out of the tree into a container. It's in rough balls the size of a grapefruit and stinks to high heaven.

Using a handheld GPS we eventually found the road we were looking for. We would not have found it without the GPS because it was nearly grown over and was now just a footpath. Our arrival at the road junction stirred the interest of the nearby villagers and many came out to find out what we were doing. After some discussions with the village "youth director" we learned that this indeed was the road we were looking for and that it was drivable but impassable due to some felled trees and a broken bridge. We enlisted the assistance of 10 of them to help us remove the trees. Our intent was to travel as far as possible to the next village.

With them leading on foot, some of us walking, and two drivers bringing up our vehicles we proceeded into the jungle. We all pitched in to clear each obstacle but soon realized our Liberian friends were much more knowledgeable about what to do and what not to do. Armed with cutlasses, a knife similar to machetes, they quickly chopped the trees into manageable sizes and removed them from the roadway. We gave up trying to help after we realized the ants like us better than the Liberians. All of us came away with numerous ant bites yet I never saw any of the Liberians, who were in sandals, get bit. We had black ants that came up our legs from the ground and copper colored ants that dropped on us from the low overhanging trees. I had a three quarter-inch black ant get under my shirt and bite me through my t-shirt. When I tried to pull it off I couldn't. It had clamped down so hard its mandibles were locked firmly on my shirt. He finally came off in pieces. We soon learned to stay on the path and away from the low trees.

Three kilometers into our adventure one of our vehicles died just as it started raining hard. With only one vehicle working our mission plan changed. We couldn't risk getting the second vehicle stuck as we would be completely stranded for hours and miss our return flight. With the one remaining vehicle we made it as far as the broken bridge but decided not to attempt a fording to the other side. Short of reaching the village but happy we found the road we returned to work on the second vehicle. We eventually got it started after and headed back to Greenville. Before leaving we thanked our helpers and gave them all the Liberian dollars we had, about $300, which is less than $3 US. They were elated.

We had just enough time to tour Greenville before our flight. Greenville is a medium-sized town with a large inland harbor and a large pier. As with everyplace else everything is in ruins. Because of the bad roads and distance from Monrovia recovery is moving a bit more slowly here. There were no vehicles in town at all. This is very unlike all other places I'd visited. Some shops are just now opening and the government has just opened a district office.

The harbor is partially blocked by a beached ship and the pier is mounded with piles of rotting timber that never got loaded on a boat and thousands of tons of scrap metal. For now the harbor is home to the locals who fish its waters and is occasionally visited by the small UN transport boat that brings in fuel and other supplies for the UN forces there.

Our visit conclude with a quick inspection of the accommodations being used by the MILOBs. They have a house which sits directly on the harbor. They can fish from their backyard and they have a small private beach just yards away. That's the nice part. Beyond that they have no running water, no AC, and electricity only five hours a day. It's very humble.

May 24: A demonstration farm

Today I paid a visit to the headquarters for Sector 2 in Tubmanburg. This sector is commanded by a Pakistani general and most of the sector's troops are Pakistani. It includes one battalion from Namibia.

Tubmanburg is a medium-sized community and once was the site of a large iron ore mine. It lies at the end of a paved road linking it with the capital.

Today the open pit mine is a lake and used by both UN personnel and the locals for swimming. The railroad line that once carried ore to the port in Monrovia has been completely scavenged down to and including the rock ballast. As you drive the road between Monrovia and Tubmanburg you see numerous piles of rock ballast that the locals have collected by hand and seek to sell. There is no machinery anywhere in the country to make crushed stone so it's either made by hand and hammer or scavenged from elsewhere. In and around Monrovia there are numerous businesses selling crushed stone, all made by hand.

First I visited the sector Operations Center and received a briefing on the sector's civil-military activities. After the briefing we proceeded to visit some of the projects in an around Tubmanburg. These included two playgrounds, a classroom for computer classes and most notably, a demonstration farm.

The Pakistanis created the playgrounds using materials that were lying about, mostly rusted car hulks. With a couple welders, some creativity, and a little paint, they made swing sets, merry-go rounds and monkey bars.

The computer class consisted of a renovated room in a building, a chalkboard, and some tables and chairs. The Pakistanis were hooking up a generator and were bringing in their office and personal computers for use during the class. They were being very resourceful and generous in the face of no available resources.

The most impressive project was the demonstration farm. Here the Pakistanis helped a group of war widows start a farm for themselves and their children. The Pakistanis secured use of the land, provided the seeds, and showed the women how to clear it, plant it, and tend the crops. The farm was now in its second planting and successfully providing sustenance for 24 people. It covered perhaps as much as five acres and included rice, cassava, and corn. The women were extremely proud of their accomplishments and made sure we inspected every inch of it. They were just beaming.

May 29: Peackeepers Day

While the US observes Memorial Day we in Liberia and in many other countries around the world are observing Peacekeepers' Day. The purpose is the same as our Memorial Day and just by coincidence they both fall on the same day this year.

The day began with a wreath laying ceremony in front of the headquarters building. A number of dignitaries attended including the Liberian vice president and ambassadors from several nations. All the UN staff, both civilian and military, were present also.

Although somewhat somber, the ceremony was punctuated by a band and bugle corps combined from the Nigerian and Ghanaian contingents. We also had a bag piper from the Irish contingent. I was most impressed by the bugle corps as they performed a couple traditional bugle calls that seemed to go on forever. How they're able to memorize the complex calls and play them without anyone missing a note is beyond me.

The senior most UN staff, Alan Doss, Special Representative to the Secretary General, delivered a speech from UN Secretary General Kofi Anan. I was surprised to learn that there are more than 90,000 peacekeepers, representing 73 countries, currently serving in 18 nations worldwide, and that Pakistan and Bangladesh contribute the greatest number of troops.

In addition to the ceremony we used this day to conduct high visibility activities all across Liberia to demonstrate our good will to the population. This includes such things road and bridge repairs, painting and cleaning schools, distributing school materials, organized sporting and cultural events, free medical care, and roadside brushing and clearing. All of this was accompanied by advance press releases and media coverage during the events.

The UN headquarters selected four schools here in Monrovia for cleaning and painting and urged all UN staff to participate. Members of the civilian staff were quick to volunteer but very few military did. I informed my entire section that we were going to participate. The groaning and complaining was incredible, especially from my Nigerian lieutenant colonel. He insisted that this type of menial work is not appropriate for officers. I refused to budge.

We loaded on a bus and headed for one of the schools. My officers looked like cattle that were headed for the slaughter. There attitudes were clearly showing. There was a bit of confusion when we arrived at the school as the civilian organizers sorted out who was in charge and what each of us was going to do. We all ended up with push brooms for cleaning out the school hallways and classrooms.

We were ready to start working but one of the civilians stopped us and said we had to attend an assembly first. She produced a piece of paper with a brief agenda on it. She pointed to the second item on the list "Peacekeeper's Speech" and asked which of us was going to talk. Yours truly got the vote. We filed into one of the larger classrooms where they had managed to assemble all 350 students. We were seated in a row of white plastic patio chairs facing the children. (By the way, the white plastic patio chair reigns supreme in Liberia. You find it in use everywhere, although regular furniture is starting to appear on the market.)

The children were sitting on benches and were squeezed very tightly together. The youngest children were in front and the oldest in the back. All wore uniforms, which is standard practice across Liberia. The room was rather dark as there are no lights (no electricity) and the only light was coming from a door opened to the outdoors and some ventilation spaces in the cinder block walls. We were all very close. It was quite a feeling to be sitting in front of all those brown faces and white eyes staring at you like some new creature that has been placed on display.

The principal said a few words to welcome us. He described how the school had been taken over by government forces during the war thus ending education in the area. He thanked us and the UN for restoring peace, which enabled them to open the school again.

After the principal spoke the children all stood and sang us a song they had made to thank us. At that point all the grumblings from my staff evaporated and suddenly they were very glad I made them come. Each of them, even the Nigerian, remarked about those moments and how they were touched by it all. After that their participation was genuine and their efforts were purposeful.

I stood and said a few words, one of the civilians presented the principal with some writing materials and drinks for the students, the children sang us another song, and then we went to work. Armed with my push broom I headed for one of the empty classrooms.

Before I continue I need to describe the school a bit more. This school is in Monrovia's center so it is larger than most. It is of cinder block construction with a few offices, a two stall bathroom, and eight classrooms. As I mentioned there is no electricity. Most of the classrooms have little to no furniture. Of the few desks they have most are broken. There are no textbooks or writing materials. Each classroom had one chalkboard. All the chalkboards were so old and so used that much of the slate was worn off. The walls both inside and out are dirty and covered with chipped and peeling paint. The school has a yard surrounded by an eight foot high cinder block wall. The school yard is relatively small, has no playground equipment, and is dirt with the exception of one corner that is covered with layers and layers of accumulated garbage.

While we swept and cleaned the inside most of the civilian volunteers whitewashed the exterior of the wall surrounding the schoolyard. The classrooms were very dirty. As I started to work I wondered why the Liberians couldn't clean these themselves. I soon realized that they have no cleaning supplies and no means to buy any. One young boy volunteered to help me. As I swept with the broom he swept the floor with a balled-up rag. We had no dustpan so he scooped up the dirt pile with his hands, placed it on the outstretched rag, and then carried it outside.

At one point I moved a desk to sweep underneath it and uncovered a huge spider hiding in a corner. This was without exaggeration the largest spider I have ever seen. I've lived in Oklahoma where tarantulas were common but this was larger than that. The body was not as heavy as a tarantula but the legs were much longer. I decided to kill it with my broom but as I made my move it took off up the wall as fast as lightning. Before I knew what was happening the young boy leaped into the air and slapped the spider with his hand. It fell to the floor where he stepped on it and killed it. His quick actions put me to shame.

As the work progressed a couple of radio reporters found me at different times and asked for an interview. Their questions were simple and naïve. Both of them asked a similar question that I thought was quite amusing. "When you found out you were coming to Liberia were you afraid you were going to die?" The answer was obviously no.

As a footnote this day did not go well for all UN Peacekeepers. One peacekeeper was killed and a second critically injured during fighting in Sudan, and one peacekeeper was killed and seven others taken prisoner during fighting in The Congo. Fortunately Liberia remained calm and peaceful.

June 29: The Pakistani way

Today, I accompanied the deputy force commander, Major General Tahir, the commander of Sector 2, Brigadier General Nazarat, and some other senior officers on a command visit to Voinjama. Voinjama lies on the Guinea border and is the northern most city in Liberia. This area was particularly hard hit during the war. I'm told the place was virtually deserted when the UN first arrived but now has an aggregate population of nearly 30,000.

It's difficult to get an exact count of how many people exist in each community. When queried the local leadership gives very different answers. For example, there are not 30,000 people in Voinjama proper but rather it's a figure that incorporates the population of many of the surrounding villages. This concept of greater community makes it nearly impossible to establish an accurate count of the population in any area, much less the entire nation. This makes it difficult to effectively plan humanitarian aid and social services for any given area. There is an effort underway to conduct an accurate census of the entire country in the not too distant future.

Voinjama is the headquarters for one of the Pakistani battalions. Since both generals are Pakistani you can imagine the unit put a great deal of effort into preparing for this visit. We were met at the airfield by a large caravan of UN and unit vehicles. We were escorted through the streets of Voinjama to the battalion headquarters with sirens blaring. This was totally unnecessary as vehicular traffic in Voinjama is virtually nonexistent. Voinjama is virtually cut off from the rest of the country. There is a road that leads south to the capital but it is in such poor condition that it's rarely traveled.

The generals were received at the headquarters by an honor guard. After the required formalities our visit began with a briefing by the battalion commander. The briefing room was packed with local civilian leaders and representatives from many of the UN agencies operating in the area. One wall of the briefing room was covered with operational maps. They were in standard military format but the Pakistanis had incorporated blinking lights of all sorts to represent borders and other key areas. It looked like a mixture of a Christmas display and an advertising billboard. It was very overdone and bizarre.

True to Pakistani tradition we were served drinks and snacks during the brief. The servants were a major interruption. They kept walking in front of the projector and up and down between the rows of seats. At one point a servant with a tray of tea blocked the projector for about two minutes while the officer he was serving mixed his tea the way he wanted. The briefer continued without a hiccup and neither of the generals batted an eyelash. I guess it's just the Pakistani way.

After the brief, the generals went outdoors to review the troops. I linked up with the battalion CIMIC officer and we headed off to view some of the battalion's CIMIC projects. We stopped first at a computer training class, which had about 12 locals in it. The class included the administrative assistants to the County Superintendent. The

government stood up a superintendent's office in each county. They are poorly equipped and trained. Many are just friends of someone in the government and have no real governing skills or experience. Sadly there is little planning on the part of the government to improve their abilities. They were basically given the title and sent out to "do good work." Many of the military units have recognized this and taken it upon themselves to assist with training such as this. The UN is also helping to build their governing capacity by conducting workshops and assigning a county support team.

We then visited a tailoring class. There were several women working at sewing machines. Laid out on a table were the fruits of their labor, some childrens' shirts. The shirts were very crude but the women were extremely proud of their products and well they should be. Just having some small purpose in life gives these people a huge boost to their self-esteem.

We then rejoined the generals as they visited a Red Cross sponsored clinic, a tie-dying business, and a refugee transition camp. I did not enjoy this part of the visit for the following reason. (Any general officers reading this may wish to skip the next paragraph.)

The generals spent very little time at each location. They rushed in with their entourage in great fanfare disrupting the normal activity. They shook some hands, asked a few questions, did a quick look around, had some pictures taken, and rushed back out. Their cursory visits gave people the impression that the generals cared little about what was truly going on but rather just wanted to be seen. I could sense, especially at the clinic, that the workers were quite irritated by the whole event. It's been my experience that all too often this is the way generals conduct themselves. There are exceptions but they seem to be few and far between. I was quite disappointed by MG Tahir that day. Perhaps he was a victim of poor planning by his staff. After the clinic incident I grabbed the CIMIC officer, who had his own vehicle, and started spending more time at each location on my own. I was always a few steps behind the generals and group but at least I got an opportunity to visit more with the people and I hope that left them with a little better opinion of us. I vowed to the CIMIC officer that I would return one day on my own when we could spend some quality time visiting with the locals and aid workers.

The clinic was very crowded and I was told that they see 200-300 patients a day. That's an incredible amount when you realize they only have two doctors and one nurse. Most of the ailments are related to poor hygiene or improper protection from mosquitoes. Thanks to the Red Cross this is one of the best stocked clinics I've yet seen. They had no shortage of medicines. Persons with more serious ailments or requiring surgery are referred to the hospital in Monrovia.

The tie-dying business was interesting. A group of six women were taught the finer techniques of this craft. When we think of tie-dying we envision kids making t-shirts or "hippie" clothing. These women were making intricate patterns on large pieces of cloth from which traditional African clothing would be made. Their work was very beautiful. I was going to purchase one of them but all the work on hand that day was recently made, probably for our visit, and was still wet and drying. Maybe I'll be able to buy something when next I visit Voinjama.

Next to the tie-dying business was a group of young men who were making furniture using simple hand tools. They have no power tools of any kind. These were some of the ex-combatants who received carpentry training as part of a program to reintegrate them into society. Although they were not on the schedule I visited them anyway. I was surprised how poor their English skills were. We had a very difficult time communicating. My guide explained that in this part of Liberia many of the people speak their tribal language and know little English. This is another result of the war in which schools were non-existent for 14 years.

We caught up to the generals at a refugee transition camp operated by the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The camp is used to return Liberian refugees from Guinea. The camp was very clean and extremely well organized. It was obvious that UNHCR had many years experience doing this type of work and they had it down to a science. It would take me a page or two to describe the whole process but suffice it to say it was very thorough and caring. I was very impressed and encouraged by

the process. At the time of our visit there was a group of refugees that had just arrived from Guinea. Many of them had been residing inside Guinea for 10 years or more.

Our official visits concluded we proceeded on a brief sight seeing trip. Voinjama is in a very hilly region. The hills are very weathered and look like big gum drops plopped on the landscape. Many have large exposed rock surfaces that are completely covered by a low growing yellow-green vegetation of some kind. There is a communications tower with an access road atop one of the nearby hills. The Pakistanis built a little cabana on top of the hill so we visited there to get a view of the surrounding area. The attached picture doesn't do justice to the view. Voinjama is the most beautiful inland area I visited so far.

We returned to the battalion HQs for lunch and were greeted by a military band in their full regalia. The Pakistani military has a lot of British tradition owing to the British colonization of that part of the world. The band included pipers and uniforms that incorporated tartan cloth. They were great to listen to. The attached photo shows the one Irish officer that accompanied us that day as he got a closer inspection of the band. He was really thrilled by their shared traditions.

Our visit concluded with lunch, which was a huge smorgasbord of Pakistani food. The generals were treated very well and those of us accompanying them were fortunate to enjoy the same spoils.

July 1: The story of David

Today on the radio I heard a story told by a man named David who was entering his adolescence during the height of the civil war here. When he was 12 the rebels came to his town Kakata. All 10,000 residents were forced to leave their homes and live in the nearby fields. Each day the rebels would come to the fields and sort through the residents to find any and all government officials, government employees, professional persons, or whatever group was on the hit list for that day. Each day no one knew who was next. They took those separated from the crowd to the edge of the field where they shot and killed them. The rebels declared this activity as public entertainment since no one had TV. All were forced to watch and were made to laugh and applaud with each execution. They all did for fear that they would be shot if they didn't.

David didn't say how long this went on or how many people were killed. He talked a little about how he has been traumatized for the remainder of his life by the events.

I've been to Kakata a couple times. It's a lively town struggling to get along just like the rest of Liberia. It's peaceful now and the overgrown fields around town are being reclaimed from the jungle and returned to farms.

The UN's Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) launched its programs in Liberia last Saturday, June 24th. They work to locate mass graves, catalog war crimes and human rights violations, and begin the process of healing deep scars within the society. I'm sure Kakata will be on their list of places to visit.

July 14 and 15: Jungle Mungle

Jungle Mungle is Pakistani slang for jungle adventure. July 14 and 15 marked a two-day adventure into the jungle of west Liberia. The Deputy Force Commander (DFC), two-star Pakistani general, decided that we needed to get out of the office so he planned an overnight trip for us. He summoned up some of his staff and off we went. Our party included the DFC, a UN civilian from the Political Affairs office, two Swedish officers, a Danish officer, and a Jordanian officer. We were accompanied by several vehicles containing both Pakistani and Namibian security.

The object of our journey was to visit some of the communities along the border with Sierra Leone. Staying overnight at a remote location would give us an opportunity to cover more territory.

I'll give some detail about our route as I understand one of my readers is tracking my movements. We left Monrovia and headed northwest on the main road toward Tubmanburg. At the village of Klay we turned west and proceeded to Tiene. We then turned north and paralleled the border to our first destination, Mano River Town.

The day started bright and

sunny. We had easy travels to Tiene. From there the road became much less trafficable and slowed our progress significantly. The terrain was hilly and the route was interspersed with a number of damaged or destroyed bridges causing us to ford several streams.

About three hours into the trip we stopped in the middle of nowhere to have a tea break. The Pakistani soldiers spread some tarps on the ground and we all sat around while we were served snacks and tea. Despite the remoteness of this location we were quickly observed by a group of locals. I know not where they came from. They just seemed to appear from the jungle. We continued north. As we neared Mano River Town we started to see the remnants of industrial activity. We passed a huge piece of Caterpiller earth moving equipment immobilized beside the road. It hasn't moved in probably 15-20 years and was overgrown with shrubs and vines. We also passed over some old railroad crossings. The only visible evidence that a railroad once existed here are the rusted sawbuck crossing signs standing amid the tall grass and weeds.

Mano River Town was once home to a large iron ore mine. The Liberian National Mining Company operated here into the 90s. The war brought an end to that. The town has many mill town type houses that are abandoned and overgrown. We parked in the southern end of the town to walk the short distance to the Sierra Leone border. The general parked his vehicle in a newly planted garden of cassava and peanuts. I'm sure he did not do it intentionally. Two other vehicles followed his lead and parked there also. I parked to the side and jumped out to keep others from parking in the garden. While the general and others walked to the border crossing I found the owner of the garden, a very old woman, and apologized for the damage we had done. I gave her $5.00 US to compensate for any loss and she was very satisfied with that.

Since the general had gone ahead I was left behind so I just visited with some of the locals. The people of this area belong to one particular tribe. Women in this tribe typically do not cover there breasts. It's common in all of Liberia to see bare-breasted women while they're bathing. But here, they're bare-breasted all the time although most cover up in the presence of strangers. Anytime we stop a crowd soon gathers. The general returned and joined the gathering. He handed out candy and cookies to the kids and chatted with the adults.

We resumed our travels and returned the way we had come. As we drove south the sky grew dark and by the time we again reached Tiene it was raining heavily. Once in Tiene we continued south instead of turning east toward Monrovia. We traveled a short distance to the village of Gbessah. Here we stopped at a renovated school. Arrangements were made for us to use a classroom for our lunch stop. By now it was late afternoon and the children were gone for the day.

This school was well furnished, for Liberia. Every classroom had desks and chairs, a new tin roof, and outdoor latrines. I was impressed. A sign at the entrance indicated that the school was a project of USAID. Sadly I noted that termites were already exacting a heavy toll on the wooden furnishings and structural roof timbers.

Many of the teachers were still on the premises and they came to chat with us. One gentleman spoke very good American English and we soon learned that he had lived in the U.S. for 11 years. He was educated at Indiana State University and has a master's degree in Economics. He returned to Liberia in 1996 and now teaches at this school where he earns $25.00 US a month. None of that seemed to add up but we didn't press for further details although we had a lot of questions in our mind. Did he really have a MS in economics? If so, why return to Liberia? Why live in this remote area earning only $25 a month?

We finished lunch and departed in a heavy downpour. Continuing south we soon turned west onto a very poor road toward the village of York Island. York Island lies at a dead end on the coast and is the western most village in the country. The road was extremely difficult to negotiate in some areas. There were several log bridges barely wide enough to accommodate our Nissan Patrols. These bridges have to be seen to be fully appreciated. Essentially they are round logs placed across a stream and they're not fixed to one another or to the stream banks in any way. As you drive over them they roll and shift in any number of ways. It takes some good driving skills and a lot of faith to cross them safely. At one point the DFC got temporarily stuck when his right rear wheel slid off the bridge and the vehicle came to rest on its frame.
We eventually arrived in York Island village and parked our vehicles. We hiked the final mile to our camping site which was just 20 yards from the beach. We hiked through jungle and swamp along a well worn foot path.

The camp site was primitive but the Pakistanis had gone to great length to make us comfortable. All of us staff officers had planned for the worse. We packed in everything we thought we would need for the night, tents, mosquito nets, food, sleeping bags, etc…We arrived to discover individual tents, electric lights powered by a discretely placed generator, and field latrines.

The rain stopped long enough for us to hike into the camp site and visit the shore. By now it was getting dark. The surf was very rough and there was a strong wind blowing in off the water. There were no visible signs of civilization as far as the eye could see except the trash washed in by the tide. We all just stood around taking it all in. As the light began to fade we were served tea and we sat there on the beach enjoying our surroundings. Before it got completely dark we decided to return to the camp to claim our tents and get our sleeping gear set up. We no sooner arrived in the camp when the heavens opened up. Everyone scrambled for umbrellas, rain gear, or the safety of their tent. I managed to get quite a bit of water in my tent in the process of placing my gear inside. We shortly found ourselves sitting around on camp stools huddled under umbrellas. One thing about being wet in this environment is that it's so warm you really don't mind.

The rain relented just in time for dinner to be served. We were brought a nice meal of rice, chicken, beef, and traditional Pakistani bread, followed again by tea. After dinner the rain began again. We sat huddled under our umbrellas and told stories about our military experiences. I think we all felt humbled by the general's experiences. He's commanded formations in the Himalayas fighting the Indians, in the border region with Afghanistan fighting the Taliban, in Somalia, and other places. He has survived numerous firefights and has survived several helicopters that crashed or were shot

down. It is all amazing stuff. He's a fine leader and a gracious host. You never feel intimidated by his presence. It's always a joy and an enriching experience to be with him. At about 2200 (10 p.m.) the general retired to his tent and the rest of us sat around a bit longer. A bottle of fine scotch appeared and we all had one drink before retiring. Anytime you have Swedes in your midst you are guaranteed a drink or two. We would not have had a drink in the general's presence as he is Muslim and doesn't drink.

Our entire trip was well guarded and during the night the Pakistanis continued to keep our site secure There is relatively little threat to our safety but theft is a significant problem. Occasionally one of the guards would walk by casting a shadow across my tent. The barrel of their AK-47 was clearly silhouetted as they passed by. It was very surreal. It felt like one of those scenes in an old war movie just before the enemy attacks.

The rain continued through the night and increased in intensity. I was the first to awake and emerge from my tent. The rain was incessant and heavy. It was everything I imagined about the tropical rainy season. Eventually everyone joined me and we just stood around in the rain. The Swedes managed to make some coffee and shared it with the rest of us. The Jordanian was amazed. It very rarely rains in Jordan. Amazingly he was able to call his wife on his cell phone and he held the phone near his tent so his wife could hear the rain beating on it.

We stood there for nearly three hours in the rain. Some of us were beginning to question the general's and our own sanity. Breakfast was the object of our waiting and it arrived about 1000 hours (10 a.m.). This was quite a challenge as it was absolutely pouring. The best we could do was quickly grab a piece of flatbread and an omelet, roll them together like a wrap, and stand around eating. True to custom this was followed by tea. The server brought around a tray laden with cups of tea, cream, and sugar. Another soldier tried to keep the server and tray covered by an umbrella. It was raining so hard that the drops were hitting the tea like little bombs and the stuff was splashing everywhere. The sugar bowl was quickly turning into a bowl of sugar water and the tray was filling with water. What an experience.

As soon as tea was done we packed up our stuff and hiked back to our vehicles. By now everyone and everything was quite wet. We waited in the village while the soldiers packed up the camp site. The general sat on the porch of one house and visited with the village elder and the men gathered there. While he was doing that I chose to walk through the village and visit with the women. Typically only the men and children are allowed to gather and engage us when we visit. The women remain at their homes with the youngest children.

York Island Town is very small. There were only ten structures and perhaps a total of 50 residents. I was chatting with one woman when I noticed her infant with a number of open sores. She had put some home remedy on the sores but they were not getting any better. The nearest clinic is probably five hours walk from her home and she has no means to pay a doctor or purchase medication. We were accompanied by a Pakistani doctor for our own medical support so I grabbed him and asked him to examine the child. He was able to provide the family with some medicine to treat the sores. I felt that one event made our whole trip worthwhile.

The Jordanian officer joined me and we walked around the village distributing the food we had brought for ourselves but not eaten. I asked one of the villagers how they subsist. They grow cassava, yams, and pineapples. They gather coconuts and palm nuts from the surrounding jungle and they raise chickens. They trade these items for fish with the residents of a nearby fishing village. Essentially that is their entire diet.

We said our goodbyes and headed home. The incessant rains since our arrival made our departure quite difficult. The water had risen greatly in all the streams we crossed the day before.Some of the logs in the bridges were displaced and the soldiers accompanying us had to wade into the waist deep waters to replace the logs and lash them together. I have nothing but respect for their level of dedication and determination. The water was so deep at one point that it flowed over the hood of our vehicle like a wave over the bow of a ship. I was amazed by the capability of our patrol.

We returned through Gbesseh and Tiene where we turned east and headed back to Monrovia. We made one last stop in Sinje at the headquarters of a Pakistani engineering battalion. There we were fed a quick lunch before we parted company with the larger part of our accompanying security and support force.

I returned home to find the rains had partially flooded my living room. Regardless I was glad to be back to a mostly dry environment.

July 27: A memorable ride in a Soviet helicopter

Today I'm off to Harper as an invited guest to the Senegalese medal parade. Each soldier qualifies to wear the UN Mission in Liberia Service Ribbon after 90 days in the mission area. Each of the troop contingents uses this opportunity to hold a big awards ceremony. The ceremonies differ from contingent to contingent but they generally include VIP speeches and a lot of drill and ceremony accompanied by military music. This is always followed by a big reception featuring the traditional food of that contingent.

Harper is a coastal town in the extreme southeastern part of the country. The last president to preside over a relatively stable Liberia, Tolbert, was from this area. Thus the town shows a bit more development than other areas of Liberia. Keep in mind that's a relative term. Harper lies at approximately four degrees north latitude and is the closest I've ever been to the Equator. It's known for nice beaches and plentiful seafood.

We had to travel two hours in a Mi-8 helicopter to get to Harper. There were 16 of us on this flight and everyone was destined for the ceremony. We were mostly military but there were seven civilians, local nationals, in our midst. I believe they were from the Senegalese embassy in Monrovia. These civilians included three young women who obviously had never flown on a helicopter before. They appeared terrified.

The Mi-8 is not known for comfort. In fact, I'm coming to detest traveling in them. The seating in all U.S. military aircraft I've flown on makes some attempt to accommodate the human body. Not so in the Soviet designed Mi-8. There are two long flat padded benches along each side of the fuselage. The space in the center of the aircraft is reserved for cargo. These benches are very rigid and have no backrest. In fact the fuselage curves up and inward, which requires you to curve your spine in a hunched position if you have any hopes of resting against it. Thus, you spend the whole flight in various positions of torture as you try to rest, relax, or sleep. Thank God the US military has paid at least some attention to ergonomics. It's obvious that wasn't important to the Soviet empire.

Our flight path took us along the coast on what was a rare beautiful sunny day for this time of year. From our altitude of 1000 feet the view was spectacular. The unspoiled palm-lined coast stretched on endlessly interrupted only by rain swollen rivers disgorging their muddy water into the blue-green Atlantic. The coast here is very interesting. If you could stand it on edge and look at it in profile it would appear like a child's cutout of ocean waves with the crest of each wave beginning to overtop and fall into the trough.This creates beautiful protected coves, one after the other, all along the coast.

Our good weather followed on the heels of several days of incessant rain. As the storminess departed for the Atlantic basin, where it might be the next hurricane, it created a strong offshore wind that was blowing perpendicular to our flight path.

This caused the aircraft to experience a continuous gentle rocking motion not unlike being in a boat. This became too much for the young ladies to bear and two of them became airsick. Air sickness bags are another advantage to traveling on US military aircraft. I won't go into details but suffice it to say that things became quite messy and now not only were we in physical pain from the torture seats we were now being assaulted by both sight and smell.

I engrossed myself in a book and tried to lose myself from the current surroundings. I'm reading Blue Clay People, by William Powers. The book is a personal memoir of an aid worker and is set in Liberia from 1999-2001. It describes this country to a 'T'. It's a very easy read and I highly recommend it. I have visited nearly

every place and experienced many of the same events mentioned in the book. Current day Liberia seems to be repeating many of the same themes in the book and I wonder if this country has any hope of finally rising above this.

OK, back to the medal parade. The troops were lining the main street of Harper and the VIP reviewing stand was set in front of the city hall. The bright blue skies, the blue berets of the troops, the dilapidated buildings of Harper, and the colored banners of the reviewing stand made for a stunning scene in this war torn and impoverished city. The ceremony was performed in French. I found myself thinking about World War I and II and how many ceremonies like this had been performed in modern times and how many more were to come. There seems to be no end. Despite its horrible consequences I suppose war is part of our human condition.

After the ceremony we proceeded to the reception area. On the way there I shared a ride with one of the civilian gentlemen who accompanied us on the helicopter. He remarked that he was amazed at how modern Harper is. I was fascinated by his comment. To me Harper is as impoverished and run down as every place else I've visited. Of course I'm applying my standards. He is from a rural county and to him Harper is modern. I love little occurrences like that. It's a subtle reminder that we constantly and unconsciously apply our own individual "standards" to everyday experiences. Maintaining a completely open and objective mind is one of the hardest things to master. I obviously have more work to do.

Our food was simple. We had roasted beef or chicken accompanied by cassava fries and sautéed onions. It was served on paper plates and we were given only a fork. We sat around on chairs in big circle and chatted while we ate. This was big departure from the more elaborate receptions I've experienced but it was no less enjoyable.

I decided to use the restroom before heading to the airfield for our return flight. I found myself having to use my French skills to find the bathroom as the Senegalese soldiers did not speak English. Thank goodness for Mr. Roberge and four years of high school French classes. At the time all I cared about was passing a language requirement. I never thought that one day I would employ those skills in West Africa.

Our ride home was uneventful. The aircraft had been cleaned during our short absence and the young ladies came prepared with some plastic bags. I don't know whether or not they became ill again as I quickly finished my book and slept most of the way home.

July 30: Sour suck

I tried a new fruit today. I'm not sure of its true name. Some call it jack fruit and some call it sour suck. It's a very large odd looking fruit as you can see by the picture. I'm told it grows on a tree but I have yet to see it before it's picked. The inside is a white somewhat slimy pulp surrounding large black seeds. It tastes like something between a banana and a pineapple. It clearly has some sourness but it is not unpleasant. It reminds me of a candy that mostly children would like. I think it would be huge hit as an ice cream flavor as it's somewhat refreshing. Maybe someone could forward this to Ben & Jerry's! They could buy Sour Suck fruit from Liberian farmers and help restore the country's economy!

Aug 22: Giving in

Mango season has passed and coconut season is upon us. I'm grateful that the mangoes are no longer attacking my house at all hours of the night. I'm sleeping much better now. Fortunately the coconut palms are just far enough from the house that none hit the roof when they fall. I snatched one up the other day and had one of the maintenance men husk it for me. I don't have any tools to open it so he told me just to bang it against something hard when I was ready to eat it. No problem. Last night I decided to sample my coconut. I tried cracking it open by holding it in my hand and banging it against the cement walkway to my front door. No success and it was quite painful to my palm to say the least. Not having any rocks to bang it with I decided the only recourse was to throw the thing against the walkway. That did the trick except it exploded like a hand grenade and covered me with coconut milk. Between the mangoes and coconuts I'm learning that African fruit can be quite dangerous.

We have very large bats that fly about our area at night. They're so big I've dubbed them prehistoric gargantuan bats. They only eat fruit but it's quite unnerving to have them pass by in the dark. A couple nights ago I was on my way back from the Internet café and nearly stumbled over one that was munching on a rotting mango lying on the ground. I surprised it and needless to say it surprised me.

Just outside the entrance to our compound is a large container where all the trash is deposited each day. The container is ringed by concertina wire in an attempt to keep the locals from scavenging through it. Recently I was on my way to work and watched a young boy about ten years old as he easily slipped through the loops of concertina wire to gain access to the garbage. It struck me in two ways. First, I thought of my own children and how fortunate we are that they don't have to comb through garbage in order to survive. Second, the ease at which he slipped through the wire amazed me. This was partly due to the fact that the wire was pulled too taught when it was installed but it made me realize that many more areas of our compound and others like it are probably just as accessible.

A couple days ago I broke down and gave some money to some beggars. Beggars are everywhere. Being white and American makes me a constant target. Everyone assumes we have money to give away. Generally I wave them off or just walk on by. For some reason the other day I just gave in. I was leaving one of the Lebanese owned grocery stores and was first confronted by a man with only one leg. He said he lost his leg as a child during the war when he stepped on an unexploded munition. Next I was confronted by a man in a wheelchair whose legs were all shrivelled up as result of polio. These types of people are found in front of all the shops frequented by foreigners. There's one store that routinely has so many handicapped beggars in front of it that people inappropriately refer to it as the leper colony instead of the Mono-prix grocery store. After leaving the grocery store I headed "home". The traffic was particularly bad that afternoon as a day of rain left many of the streets flooded and nearly impassable. It took me over an hour to travel the five miles from the

store to our compound. Any time you're stuck in traffic you get accosted by young people selling everything from eggs to auto parts. On the way home I bought a candy bar, two eggs, and two small bags of popped corn, from three different vendors, all through the car window.

Ducks and chickens, for that matter all livestock, run free here. Ducks and chickens are certainly the most prevalent and they constantly present road hazards. Chickens especially but when it rains the ducks come to the puddles in the road. Chickens flee before an approaching vehicle but ducks don't even take notice. We do our best to avoid hitting any as it can cause a

scene and result in a pay out of $5-10 from your own pocket. Superstitions are alive and well in this part of the world and they firmly believe that if you hit and kill a duck that bad luck will befall you soon thereafter. West Africans avoid hitting ducks at all costs, even if it means running off the road. The Nigerians are especially wary of this.

A couple weeks ago I attended a meeting where it was being discussed how to determine when was the appropriate time to draw down the UN mission here. A number of proposals had been put forward by the civilian side of the UN mission. They called them benchmarks and there was a lot of disagreement on what the benchmarks should be. There were two principal characters in this discussion. Both happened to be women and each represented one of the more senior managers in the mission. One approached the question from an ideological point of view. We shouldn't draw down until we're sure the country will be able to stand on its own. The other represented the fiscal point of view. This mission is costing a lot and we need to draw down as soon as possible. Missing from the room but represented in writing was a gentleman who represented the political point of view. The donor countries are only willing to keep this up so long. There were only four military officers present including myself.

We watched in amazement as the argument went back and forth with each point of view, ideological and fiscal, unwilling to give an inch. It became quite an exchange at times but always remained professional. The meeting ended with no real progress. Those of us from the military were quite amused and amazed. We are very results oriented and we had just wasted a large amount of time watching some egos go to blows with one another. More importantly, we realized that at the extreme other end of this argument are 3 million Liberians trusting that everything will be done to help their country recover. Little do they know.